

Note on the Publication of Astronomical Papers, with special reference to the International Catalogue. By W. W. Bryant.

It has been suggested that in view of the approaching Conference on the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature which was to take place when the scheme had been working for five years a few notes on the practical working of it would be very useful to the Regional Bureau, which in the case of astronomical papers published in the United Kingdom is the Royal Astronomical Society, represented by a committee, and that the best form for these notes would be a short paper presented to the Society.

I undertook this the more readily as I have had to deal with the working of the schedule and instructions, not only for the United Kingdom, but also indirectly for the whole world, as I have revised all the slips sent in for the three volumes already issued, and have also had the opportunity of testing the application of the same schedule to a great deal of literature already published before the commencement of the International Catalogue.

The most important point on which I desire to lay stress is the increasing need for centralisation of special scientific literature in special publications. It may seem that in the case of astronomy in this country the list of publications in which occasional contributions of scientific value appear is not a long one, but astronomy is only one of seventeen sections, and some of these sections are so much overweighted that the expenses connected with their issues are a great stumbling-block to the success of the scheme, which must ultimately stand or fall by the financial support given to it. And a rule limiting the quantity of any one science is hardly admissible; I think, therefore, we should press for a general rule, on the lines of the following suggestion.

Certain periodicals to be adopted for each science as "standard." Any astronomical articles appearing in them to be indexed under Schedule E. Papers of astronomical value appearing elsewhere to be, as far as possible, reprinted in one or other of the "standard" periodicals.

I am aware that this proposal has obvious disadvantages. It appears to discourage the publication of astronomical articles in periodicals of general interest, and thus to prevent the appeal of the science to a larger public. It lays the burden of deciding what is worth reprinting on some person or persons in what might appear a somewhat invidious manner, and the person or persons considered competent might be unable or unwilling to undertake the responsibility. Leaving the other objections to be raised elsewhere I will say a few words on these two.

As to the first, I take it the intention of the Catalogue is to enable scientists to trace work done in any special section of

their special science, and to them articles meant to popularise science with the general reader do not appeal. They have their publishers and their public, and will not suffer appreciably. Books, of course, are few in number, and will not be affected by the proposal. As regards another class of publication, original observations, often of value, are made by people who desire prompt and unquestioning publication. Their purpose being thus served what is to prevent them from sending in complete series to our Society or elsewhere if they desire scientific recognition? Some of them already do this, and in one department, as is well known, one of our Fellows, Mr. Denning, to a great extent does it for them. And this brings me to the partial disposal of the second objection mentioned above. I think the scientific editors of the "standard" periodicals (or the secretaries and council of the Societies in the case of publications by Societies) would find practically no difficulty in carrying out my suggestion, if the original authors will go so far as to submit their papers and observations.

One more word as to accessibility. It has been necessary in the Royal Society Catalogue work to send a small staff of indexers and assistants to the British Museum and the Natural History Museum to get at some publications not to be found at Burlington House. This not only involves a great amount of time, but invites the question as to whether it is worth while indexing papers so difficult to unearth. The difficulty was probably not foreseen at the time of publication, but there is no excuse for not guarding against a repetition of it in the future.

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